Screening the Pirandello effect

SCREENING THE PIRANDELLO EFFECT: THIRD-GENRE PERFORMATIVITY IN *LA CANZONE DELL'AMORE*

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'Essere? essere è niente! essere è farsi!'
['To be? To be is nothing. To be is to become.'] (*Mn* IV, 476)[1]

In this article I present and discuss the so-called 'Pirandello effect', with particular emphasis on its narratological implications and its psychoanalytic use to describe the effects of assigned gender roles in the formation and development of gender identity. This notion is framed within the theory of gender performativity to highlight the narrative construction of gender roles in the first Italian talkie, *La canzone dell'amore* [*Love Song*] (1930), freely adapted from Pirandello's short story 'In silenzio' ['In Silence'] (1905). I will call 'third-genre performativity' the gender effects produced by the genre that enables and conditions the passage from short story to film, and I suggest that the Pirandello effect finds its essential third genre in melodrama. The interpretation of melodrama as a third genre and its visualisation on the screen serve the purpose of strategic essentialism: by combining the display of emotional excess with the performative conventions of the history of the genre in musical theatre, melodrama articulates the transmedial continuity of the short story with its corresponding 'film body'; and by embodying voices as gender roles, the third genre helps to expose and deconstruct several oppositions that characterise Pirandello's representation of gender identity within Italian mainstream culture.

TROUBLE WITH METALEPSIS

To the extent that comparative literature continues to challenge expectations about its disciplinary identity, as argued by Gayatri Spivak, 'the proper study of literature may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative'.[2] My leading case in point is the 1999 preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* (1990), where Judith Butler explains that she originally took her clue on 'how to read the performativity of gender' from Franz Kafka's parable 'Vor dem Gesetz' ['Before the Law'] (1915):

> There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.[3]

According to Jacques Derrida, acknowledged as the theoretical source of this reading, Kafka's story illustrates the performative laws of literature, namely the

'citationality' and 'historicity' of its speech acts, which normalise authorial conventions and, at the same time, contain an essential possibility of narrative transgression outside literature itself.[4] Butler calls this transgression 'metalepsis', which is not only a figure of speech that originates from judicial rhetoric, as a 'citation' that substitutes the subject with a 'subject-effect',[5] but a condition of possibility of narrative in general – and it is a very Pirandellian condition, one that expands narrative discourse into the culturally sustained recitation of the '*cosiddetta* vita normale' ['*so-called* normal life'] (*Tr* I, 582), as we read in the 1921 'Avvertenza sugli scrupoli della fantasia' ['Warning on the Scruples of the Imagination']. Butler does not refer to Pirandello, yet more than Kafka he can provide some textbook examples for the theory of gender performativity, and this could also shed new light on the comparison between the two writers after the 1956 essay by Giuditta Podestà.[6] The connection between Butler and Pirandello has been already suggested by Adalgisa Giorgio, and it will be here developed in the framework of the narrative transgressions involved in a parallel reading of gender and genre.[7]

When Gérard Genette introduced the term 'metalepsis' in the field of narratology, he made an almost obvious reference to Pirandello's meta-theatrical plays of the 1920s. In his 1972 *Discours du récit* [*Narrative Discourse*], Genette defined metalepsis as the overstepping of a 'boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells. […] In a certain way', he continued, 'the Pirandello manner of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* [*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921)] or *Tonight We Improvise* [*Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (1929)], where the same actors are in turn characters and players, is nothing but a vast expansion of metalepsis'.[8] The possibility of transgressing this conventional but 'sacralised' narrative boundary opens the text to various forms of metaliterature and transmediality, and it leads to consider the multiple ways of interpreting gender in textuality, as Susan Lanser summarises it: 'Texts, like bodies, *perform* sex, gender and sexuality'.[9]

Pirandello was very well aware of the 'trouble' involved in this transgression, and its inherent narrative strangeness, in particular, leads his work to a critical reconsideration of the meaning of madness. One only needs to remember the people from the audience crying out 'manicomio!*'* ['madhouse!'] at the première of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*: it was a blunt reaction but it proved a point. In the same year 1921, Pirandello wrote a play about madness, *Enrico IV* [*Henry IV*], where the title-character Enrico explains that he is simply performing the narrative effects of madness, as a play within the play that undoes the 'costruzioni' ['constructions'] of normality by conflating role and identity, namely by enacting the essential narrative transgressions from within 'the world *of* which one tells':

> se siete accanto a un altro, e gli guardate gli occhi – come io guardavo un giorno certi occhi – potete figurarvi come un mendico davanti a una porta in cui non potrà mai entrare: chi vi entra, non sarete mai voi, col vostro mondo dentro, come lo vedete e lo toccate; ma uno ignoto a voi, come quell'altro nel suo mondo impenetrabile vi vede e vi tocca... [*Mn* II, 848][10]

Not only is the anticipation of the inner world of the 'altro' ['other'] is a fiction constructed and installed from the outside, but the only possibility of reading and understanding the other, as it were, is to become 'ignoto' ['unknown'] to oneself. The exposure and disruption of the fictional but normative metalepsis of normality, which

is one of the most profound legacies of Pirandello's representation of madness, can thus be easily expanded towards the question of gender performativity. After all, the simile of the 'mendico davanti a una porta' ['beggar before a door'] is homologous with the parable of the man before law in Butler's reading of Kafka. On the threshold of otherness, Enrico plays the same game of roles and identity as the Ignota of *Come tu mi vuoi* [*As You Desire Me*] (1930), pushing the madness of his 'wounded masculinity' to the point of unreadability, as argued by John Champagne: 'Literally losing himself in his performance, he becomes a casualty of gender's history'.[11]

In the case of gender performativity, a sustained metalepsis enables and conditions the passage from the sexual attributes of a body to an assumed interior essence, or a gendered mind. Pirandello questions the forms of this passage outside the narrative, moving from assumption to substitution, and from social to individual performance. 'The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us', however, as pointed out by David Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), arguing that we cannot infer any simplicity and identity of the mind from the perceptions that 'pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations'.[12] It is for this same reason that we cannot be simplistic with Pirandello's idea of meta-theatre and reduce it to what happens on a stage: a Pirandellian meta-play is not just about performance, it dramatises performativity, and it does so by displaying the normative effects and the possibilities of transgressing the narrative levels of being and becoming. The morally compromised concept of 'hypocrisy', for example, which in classical theatre denoted the role of an actor speaking outside the chorus and, by extension, 'performing a function' within the conventions of social life,[13] can be found at the core of many of Pirandello's meta-theatrical contentions.

In his first essay on theatre, entitled 'L'azione parlata' ['Spoken Action'] (1899), Pirandello made a bold programmatic statement: 'Non il dramma fa le persone; ma queste il dramma' ['It is not drama that makes people, but people that make drama'] (*Spsv*, p. 1016), and this statement 'shows his awareness that speech in drama is performative; it makes things happen', as Ann Hallamore Caesar has noted.[14] We may accordingly argue that 'it is not gender that makes people, but people that make gender', although we should also clarify that this 'making' does not consist in a singular performance, let alone a simply linguistic one; that people can only make it happen within the historical possibilities of interpreting a body as the context of gender; and that the gendered subject, as in a Pirandellian meta-play *a soggetto*, does not pre-exist its own becoming.

HISTORY AT A THIRD LEVEL

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler clearly stated that the performativity of gender 'is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated'.[15] Performing gender, and identity more in general, is the result of discursive practices of interpretation which are historically negotiated. We can see performativity through the history of 'mentalities', which are installed at a 'third level' between intellectual and material history, individual and universal narratives.[16] This third level calls for a different conceptualisation of the gendered dualism and hierarchy of mind and body in Pirandello's theatre, as respectively associated with an essentialised view of the masculine and the feminine.

Psychoanalysis is a critical discursive practice in this conceptual space. Joan Riviere's 1929 study on 'Womanliness as a masquerade', for example, not only

opened the way to a discussion of 'mixed' gender types that is relevant to the theory of gender performativity,[17] but it would also provide a critical context for re-reading Pirandello's plays such as *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, of the same year. In contemporary Italian literature, some Pirandellian twists to this theory can be easily found in Goliarda Sapienza's novels, already from *Lettera aperta* [*Open Letter*] (1967), where the trouble of improvising an identity from a narrative voice is expanded through a psychoanalytic discourse that feeds into 'autofiction', and the narrator declares: 'io non so improvvisare' ['I don't know how to improvise'].[18]

If we look closer at psychoanalysis, we find that the metaleptic effects of the normative discourse on gender (from role to identity) and sexuality (from appearance to essence) have been already associated with Pirandello's plays, and perhaps unexpectedly in connection with the medical naturalisation of gender ambiguities in the operating theatre. In a 1976 essay, the psychologist Zella Luria discussed the case of a group of baby girls born with hermaphroditic traits, who were 'labelled' as either girls or boys according to their more or less pronounced genital virilisation; when reconstructive surgery was later made available, most of the young adults chose to reinforce their gender identity according to the assigned gender role, as follows:

> The children who had lived many years with the assigned masculine gender chose to keep it. Those who had lived a long time with the assigned feminine gender chose corrective surgery toward female characteristics. They had in fact become what they had been assigned to be. This can aptly be called the 'Pirandello effect'.[19]

Luria concludes her essay by stating that the literary discovery made by Pirandello as regards the 'inévitables illusions' ['inevitable illusions'] of social life may be applied to gender and other similarly identity-defining notions in the humanities, with an understanding that illusions should not be considered as biologically determined. Without a critical meta-narrative of the performativity conditions that are at play in identity formation, however, the descriptive framework of the Pirandello effect may fall back on normative interpretations of the 'unisex fallacy',[20] which we could tentatively characterise as 'herma-Freuditism'.

In the third chapter of *The Psychoanalytic Movement* (1985), social anthropologist Ernest Gellner put under sharp criticism the way in which psychoanalytic narratives reinforce other social and institutional normative discourses, suggesting that the analyst is like the author or the director in 'plays such as *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, or *Tonight We Improvise*', where conventional yet formal distinctions between theatre and life are deliberately broken down, so that only the person 'who can throw the switch one way or the other to determine whether one is within or outside the play and its conventions, is in charge and can easily dominate'.[21] This comparative reading of psychoanalysis and meta-theatre is particularly significant because Gellner coined the 'Pirandello effect', without any immediate connection with gender but tackling the relationship between 'inner story' and history that generates a 'continued identity'. As a result, he also provided some critical pointers to the study of the correlation between meta-narrative construction of gender identity and the genre-specific effects of a story.

In a 1967 review precisely entitled 'The concept of a story', Gellner discussed what the philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie called 'essentially contested concepts', namely complex concepts like 'democracy' or 'art' which are inherently problematic and open to dispute but, at the same time, repeatedly used as one and the same concept to perform an evaluative function, therefore producing normative behaviour.

The identity of these concepts over time can only be described through a variety of interpretations, and any attempt at transcending their essentially contestable status contradicts their definition and creates an 'essentialist illusion', as Gellner explains:

> From the inside, what characterizes essentially contested concepts is indeed that they are essentially contested, in other words that in principle no final, knock-down argument is available for settling the contests to which they give rise. But trying to describe the general situation, and tacitly adopting a kind of divine, external viewpoint, Gallie speaks as if such a criterion for terminating disagreements did exist. This is not just an ordinary contradiction, but a rather special form of it which I like to call the Pirandello effect, which consists of talking all at once both inside and outside the play.[22]

The acknowledgement of the Pirandello effect may thus provide the best argument against all sorts of essentialism, because the aspiration to transcend the role is as human as the necessity to play in it, and because the tension between role and identity, inside and outside, can be exposed but never resolved. According to Gellner, if 'history is, above all, a *story*', the concept of a story must remain essentially contestable, or else historical identity is predicated on a 'genetic fallacy'.[23] It has been suggested that 'literature' and 'performance' may also be essentially contested concepts,[24] so that the performative potential of Pirandello's stories logically yields the unsolvable tensions of his meta-theatre. We can suitably add 'gender' to this conceptual framework, and I suggest using Butler's theory of gender performativity to screen a psychoanalytic reading of its 'dissimulated historicity' through the technological challenges and rapid transformations of early cinema.

MELOGRAPHY AND MELODRAMA

In the debate that developed at the beginning of the twentieth century on the 'essence of theatre' as a textual performance or a spectacle, the stage became an 'essentially contested' space between author and director, and Pirandello 'tried to ensure that the play was not a spectacle but a predicament', as Gellner would further say.[25] It was a predicament of interpretation for the 'terzo elemento imprescindibile' ['third, unavoidable element'] (*Si*, p. 643),[26] namely the actor, but also for the audience. The possibility of turning cinema from a popular spectacle into a new art form further complicated the debate on the dramatic text and its relation to the screenplay, impinging on the discussion about the theory of literary genres. As a consequence, cinematic performativity became a source of theoretical anxiety for Pirandello.

The formula devised by Alberto Savinio to capture Pirandello's theatre, as 'dramma del passaggio' ['drama of passage'],[27] can be used to describe the playwright's own predicament between stage and screen. We can safely say that Pirandello's main idea for art cinema, namely the creation of a new genre of visual music called 'melografia' ['melography'] – as mentioned in a 1928 letter to Marta Abba (*LMA*, p. 46), while in Berlin to discuss the film adaptation of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* – was not as original as he believed and did not show much understanding of the potential of the new medium. However, this idea is particularly significant in our context because it looked at melodrama as the essential genre that brought together literature and music under the performative arts, and it was while trying to distance himself from melodrama that Pirandello made a theoretical effort to create a new genre for the cinematic audience. Pirandello's ambiguity towards melodrama may well be symptomatic of a slanted psychological association between

music and 'the nature of the feminine', as pointed out by Daniela Bini, in contrast to contemporary plays such as *Mélo* (1929) by Henri Bernstein – which Pirandello, unlike Abba, strongly censured for its 'lewdness'.[28] In fact, the excessive theatricality of melodrama came to challenge the conventions of both psychological realism and bourgeois sexuality, and in doing so it raised the question of the genre-specific effects in the representation of gender roles.

By mobilising the modern history and function of melodrama, it can be argued that Pirandello's melography implicitly problematised the apparent cultural correlation between a biological gender binary and the classical theory of literary genres: poetry and prose, mimetic and diegetic poetry, tragedy and comedy, to name just a few. From this underlying binary a number of mixed genres would naturally ensue, which can be subsumed under the concept of a 'third genre'. Historically, not only was melodrama conceived as a third genre from the very beginning, stemming from the late Renaissance 'intermedi' and the radically modern genre of 'tragicomedy', but the resulting taste for hybridity was counteracted by an unprecedented medical and legal definition of 'bisexuality', which confined the representation of a 'third gender' to literature and the arts.[29] The literary tradition that goes from Antonio Beccadelli's *Hermaphroditus* (1425) to Savinio's *Hermaphrodito* (1918) shows precisely that the theory of gender performativity becomes historically readable in connection with a classical theory of genre, whose first law is summarised by Derrida as follows: 'Il ne faut pas mêler les genres' ['Genres are not to be mixed'].[30] Narrative transgressions of this essential law can be found in Pirandello's inaugural genre of the 'film-novel' *Si gira…* [*Shoot!*] (1916),[31] where the 'ibrido giuoco' ['hybrid game'] (*Tr* II, 573) of cinematography is contrasted with music and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, finally silenced. With Christine Gledhill, we could say that Pirandello's views on cinematic performativity lead to investigating melodrama as one of the main genres for 'rethinking gender as generic'.[32]

I suggest calling 'third-genre performativity' the narrative form that enables and conditions the passage from one genre to another, and I will use melodrama to link this passage to the theory of gender performativity. The idea of a third genre may be here understood as a form of '*strategic* use of positivist essentialism' with a 'scrupulously visible' interest in interpretation, as practised by feminist and queer theories after Spivak.[33] The visualisation of melodrama as a third genre, which combines the interpretive act of singing on the screen with the performative conventions of its history in musical theatre, plays a strategic function in deconstructing several binary oppositions that characterise Pirandello's representation of gender identity, as much as the generic binaries that are often called 'Pirandellian', such as life and form, truth and illusion, being and appearance. We should expand this framework to include the explicitly gendered opposition between voice and silence, and its significance with the advent of the talking film in the Italian cultural context.

'Talking film is as little needed as a singing book', as Vicktor Shklovsky wrote in 1927[34] – but what about the music-film or the film-novel then? With his 1929 essay 'Se il cinema parlante abolirà il teatro' ['Whether talking film will abolish theatre'], Pirandello aimed at displacing the continuity between theatre and cinema from speech to music, contrasting the 'talking film' with melodrama and putting forward the technologically enhanced mixed genre of what he now called 'cinemelografia' ['cinemelography'] (*Si*, p. 1373). In 1930 the first Italian talkie was released, Gennaro Righelli's *La canzone dell'amore*, based on a short story by Pirandello which was entitled, by happy coincidence, 'In silenzio'.[35] The first sentence of the film, 'Lasciatelo parlare' ['Let him speak'], is referred to the male protagonist, a music

composer called Enrico, but it can also be meta-narratively addressed to the audience of this first Italian talking film at large. Melodrama was the explicit and essential genre of the film adaptation, for reasons that are inherent to the reconfiguration of genres in the performative spectrum of the talking film. Despite its technical success and the fact that the première was highly praised by Mussolini, Pirandello 'faulted the dialogue, the acting, indeed, everything about the film except the high quality of Righelli's "marvellous" photographic images and the music', as summarised by Nina daVinci Nichols, namely everything but 'those elements of cinemelography'.[36] Following Pirandello's critical reactions and creative responses, the main trouble that I will highlight with this inceptive Italian talkie is that voices are always embodied, but character voices follow conventions of a given genre that may or not correspond to the assumptions associated with a gendered body.

SCREENING VOICES

In a scene of David Lynch's film *Mulholland Drive* (2001), on the stage of an old cinema theatre called 'Club Silencio', singer Rebekah Del Rio appears as herself performing a love song *a cappella*, the spellbinding Spanish version of *Crying*. In the audience, the two female protagonists of the film are moved to tears, until the singer collapses, the love song carries on, and the singer's body is dragged behind the curtains: the illusion is broken, we understand that it was a playback, but the singer's collapse and the tears of the spectators are real. This scene could be compared to the death-like fainting of Mommina at the end of *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*, while she is singing the aria 'Leonora, addio!' ['Leonora, Farewell!'] from Verdi's 'quintessential Italian melodrama' *Il Trovatore* (1853).[37]

Three main considerations can be drawn from this comparative reading of film, opera, and play. Firstly, bearing in mind that the farewell aria in Verdi's opera is sung by the title-character troubadour, the tenor Manrico, it is arguable that the fainting of Mommina is a suggestive example of gender performativity (as opposed to mere performance), where the identification of acting with becoming gives voice to a new subjectivity and discloses the law of gender as a 'tool of genre'.[38] Secondly, as with Del Rio's version of *Crying*, the first talkie, *La canzone dell'amore*, had to be a 'weepie', re-staging the male identification of the audience and re-aligning its gaze with the narrative effects of an excessively emotional subject. Finally, as *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* is conceived as a staging of Pirandello's short story entitled 'Leonora, addio!' (1910), melodrama can be seen as the genre that enables the continuity between short story and play. The inclusion of an operatic film projection in the play clearly represents the meta-theatrical passage to cinema, perhaps with an ironic reference to classical 'Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre':

> *dietro il sipario tirato fino a nascondere lo spigolo del muro col fanale, i servi di scena avranno collocato un grammofono a cui sia stato applicato un disco col finale del primo atto d'un vecchio melodramma italiano,* 'La forza del destino' *o* 'Un ballo in maschera' *o qualunque altro, purché se n'abbia sincronicamente la projezione su quel muro bianco che fa da schermo.* (*Mn* IV, 331)[39]

Well before Pirandello's destruction of the 'fourth wall' with *Ciascuno a suo modo* [*Each in His Own Way*] (1924), and even before his powerful metaphor of the 'buco nel cielo di carta' ['hole in the paper sky'] (*Tr* I, 468) that divides classical and

modern tragedy, the appearance of cinema screens without a curtain bewildered the early audience used to the conventions of theatre auditoriums, where the curtain not only signalled the beginning and ending of the performance but also parted fiction from life. In this last meta-play, the curtain is simply used to conceal the phonograph, the source of both speech and music, while the wall supplements a projective 'naked' screen for the spectators, creating a space of cinematic performativity which conflates the actors' identification and the projection of the audience's generic expectations as regards melodrama: 'Questo è muro!' ['This is a wall!'] (*Mn* IV, 380, 385), as the Leading Actress mutters while hitting her head on the three stage walls before performing the final scene as Mommina. On Pirandello's stage, the screen becomes the 'naked mask' of melodrama, showing that the original attraction of cinema to melodrama 'began not with the technical possibility of synchronizing the operatic voice with the image but earlier, in the silent era', as explained by Michal Grover-Friedlander.[40] This is also why the short story 'In silenzio' can find in melodrama the essential transition genre to *La canzone dell'amore* and is bound to embody the effects of the relative 'gender trouble'.

The visualisation of melodrama as a generic and essentially hybrid genre not only articulates the transmedial continuity of the short story with the first Italian talking film, but it also shows the cultural assumptions and expectations as regards gender roles that are at play with genre-specific conventions. The quest for a new language of cinema, in fact, posed a question of gendered voices before the technical synchronisation of sound, yet not beyond the conventionality required for the effectiveness of the speech acts. It is important to bear in mind, as Maggie Günsberg has commented, that Pirandello's plays were produced within a mainstream Italian culture which 'featured problematization of the female gender as a narrative concern', and Italian cinema 'saw this same issue transposed into a technologically advanced medium'.[41] Günsberg discusses the example of Mario Camerini's film *T'amerò sempre* [*I'll always love you*] (1933), but the corresponding issues of gender and genre can be highlighted by contrasting *La canzone dell'amore* with the short story adapted for the screenplay.

TRAGICOMEDY, OR EXCESS IN SHORT

Analysing and comparing the evolution of narrative genres, Pirandello argued that the 'metamorphosis' of the short story (*novella*) into the dramatic form by way of extended dialogues suffered from the same 'eccesso di oggettivismo' ['excess of objectivism'] of the phonograph and the cinematograph, which present their voices and characters as 'outside' the narrative, and this genre was therefore destined to fall back on comedy rather than tragedy (*Si*, pp. 708-11).[42] A different outcome is suggested in Pirandello's meta-theatre, especially when short stories are staged to expose the performative as well as narrative excess that has been described as metalepsis, an excess of subjectivity that pretends to speak at once 'inside and outside the play'. In this case, the metamorphosis that would fail to meet the genre of classical tragedy could be well attained as tragicomedy, a middle space for hybrid genres that may be interpreted *a soggetto* within Pirandello's theory of 'humour' – and this was a possibility that cinema was able to understand and operate from the very beginning through the meta-narrative use of melodrama.

It is precisely the emphasis on narrative excess that produces the third-genre performativity of melodrama from within the third-person narrative of the short story,

which coalesces with the cinematic experience. The subject that embodies this excess would be conventionally a woman, as we have seen with Mommina, but we should not overlook the generic effects of melodrama in film, which is itself presented as a gendered body and subjected to a gendered gaze. As explained by Linda Williams in her 1991 essay 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', melodrama is the essential 'woman's film', or 'weepie', as women are traditionally represented as sexualised victims of their own excessive emotions, and the cinematic melodrama creates an audience that enjoys the perversely transgressive pleasure of identification with a victimised subject. In her essay, Williams further pushes the melodramatic 'film body' into the psychoanalytic field to confront the corresponding 'original fantasy' of the genre, and she identifies it with the enigma of the 'origin of the subject' from the discovery of sexual difference, arguing that the 'melodramatic weepie' stages a ritual of 'the loss of origin – impossibly hoping to return to an earlier state which is perhaps most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother'.[43] In the genre of parental melodrama, the essential fantasy of possessing a baby is destined to reconfirm the original loss and the sense of lateness for a solution outside the fantasy itself. Both Pirandello's short story 'In silenzio' and the film based on it, *La canzone dell'amore*, belong to this genre of parental fantasy.

Let us briefly consider 'In silenzio', first published in 1905 in the art-nouveau journal *Novissima,* and eventually included with a certain prominence as the eponymous story of the 1923 collection of *Novelle per un anno*. This is the story of a young fatherless boy, the pale and bespectacled Cesarino, who is apparently sent to a boarding school because he could not any longer focus on his books and kept looking at his single mother with the emotional turmoil that is characteristic of puberty, although without the imagination that is necessary to fathom the reason of his embarrassment. His mother used to call him Cesare, like his father, who is otherwise never mentioned and the first figure of the silence that dominates Cesarino's life:

> Figlio unico, non aveva conosciuto il padre, il quale doveva esser morto giovanissimo, se la madre si poteva ancora dir giovane: trentasette anni. Lui già ne aveva diciotto: cioè proprio l'età che aveva la madre quando aveva sposato. (*Na* II, 6)[44]

This rather troubling chronology not only suggests that the boy was now the same age as his mother when she got married, but also that he was born when his father died, eighteen years earlier. The coincidence is not necessarily true, but Cesarino had 'poca fantasia' ['little imagination'] and he could not escape the resulting Freudian entanglement as regards roles and identity. The silence that displaces the late father outside language, and the consequent difficulty for the son to act out and find a solution to the classical Oedipus complex, would install the story of Cesarino's puberty in the genre of tragicomedy, which is 'la zona dell'opposizione nevrotizzante, del compromesso gioioso ed angosciante, dei sintomi inventivi e invalidanti, dell'ambivalenza, dell'ambiguità' ['the zone of neurosis-inducing opposition, joyful and distressing compromise, inventive and invalidating symptoms, ambivalence, and ambiguity'], as Elio Gioanola defines it.[45]

In the performative space between being and becoming which is warranted by puberty, which Pirandello represents as a stage of physical and psychological tension between life and form,[46] Cesarino finds himself confronting a dramatic choice: his mother dies while secretly giving birth to a 'love child', from an unknown man who abandoned her, and the boy is forced to become an adult. The boy decides to raise the baby stepbrother with the help of a midwife, and dreams to pursue studies in law in

the hope of finding a clerical job. However, when a year later the biological father comes back and claims his son, the improvised family clashes with the law and the fantasy is shattered: Cesarino resolves to kill himself and the baby in silence, locking themselves in the bedroom and going to sleep while a brazier burns with fateful intensity. Their actual death is only implied by the general tone of this final scene, but we are expected to match our interpretive 'scruples of imagination' with the boy's fatal lack of it, and assume that nobody saved them from the smoke or the fire.

Despite its tragic vocation, the suicidal ending does not escape 'melodramatic overtones', as Giovanni Bussino writes in the introduction to a collection of Pirandello's short stories entitled *Tales of Suicide*, which includes 'In Silence'.[47] In fact, alongside Romantic and Decadent literature, suicidal narratives featured widely in nineteenth-century Italian opera, as in the ending of Verdi's *Trovatore* or in the famous soprano aria 'Suicidio!' ['Suicide!'] from Amilcare Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (1876), which was an obsession of the young Pirandello (*LPR*, pp. 91, 128). It could be said that Cesarino performs the failure of paternity as the excess of tragedy, yet with a melodramatic suicide that stages the impossible return to the body of the mother.

This reading would help understanding why and how *La canzone dell'amore* resolves the scene of suicide in the story within the genre of tragicomedy, besides the more obvious commercial and ideological reasons for a happy ending. Arguably, the film adaptation displays effects of third-genre performativity that enable and condition the way in which it fully embodies the genre of tragicomedy, becoming what Pirandello would call an 'illustration'. The happy ending is obtained by two essential changes in the screenplay: the main protagonist becomes a young woman, and she is eventually saved from her own emotional excess. The gender change and the consequent happy ending are clearly over-determined by the visualisation of melodrama on the screen: the role played by Cesarino would correspond better to a female character voice. Cesarino is therefore replaced by Lucia; and whereas Cesarino dies silently with his mother's love child, Lucia is the subject of the title's 'love song' that makes the main musical theme of the film. Not only the synchronisation of sound and image was a technical success, but more importantly the audience's expectations in the genre were met with great popularity, so much so that a spin-off was made twenty-two years later by Franco Rossi, with the song title *Solo per te, Lucia* [*Only for You, Lucia*] (1952).

In a 1930 interview, Pirandello complained that the gender change in the film adaptation destroyed the 'pathos' of the story: unlike the 'maternità istintiva' ['maternal instinct'] of a woman, he argued, the young boy had to learn his role.[48] We can certainly refer to fascist ideology for the general conception of this maternal instinct,[49] but even so it is a matter of convention more than censorship, both at a cultural and at a genre-specific level. Assuming that Cesarino had to learn what would have been 'instinctive' to a woman, the boy was forced to improvise his parental fantasy, and he could not perform it without embodying a 'maternal' character voice. Perhaps the reproach that the teacher made to Cesarino at the beginning of the story serves as a meta-narrative question: 'Crede che un lezione di storia si possa improvvisare?' ['Do you think a history lesson can be improvised?'] (*Na* II, 5). Improvising requires the acknowledgement that within the possibilities of becoming set by a given genre, history is the extension of an essentially contestable concept.

In order to bring together some of the main theoretical points raised so far, let us consider a strange but eloquent scene towards the beginning of the film. Enrico and Lucia are hiding from their friends in the crown of a tree, as in a literal 'love nest'. Enrico must be leaving soon to go home and celebrate his music degree with his family, but Lucia must remain in Rome to complete her studies, so she asks:

– [Lucia:] Ritornerai presto davvero?
– [Enrico:] Sì te lo prometto, presto.
– Per me?
– Per te... e per il nostro figlio.
– Il nostro figlio?
– L'avevi abbandonato![50]

While saying this, Enrico gives Lucia a little puppet that the couple had just received as a gift. The projection of the future baby in this conversation contrasts with the title of the song that Enrico had dedicated to his love, 'Solo per te, Lucia': Enrico's love song is only for Lucia, but Lucia's motherly love, as she will declare later in the film, is 'un altro amore, che occupa tutta la mia vita' ['another love, that fills my life completely'], and she cannot forget it because she is called to embody and perform it for the rest of her life. The fictional offspring of their love is something comparable to the emphatic description of the screenplay of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, which Pirandello wanted to be the child of his love for Marta Abba, as we can read in the same 1928 letter in which the playwright mentioned for the first time the term 'melography': 'voglio che in tutto e per tutto questo lavoro sia NOSTRO, nato da NOI DUE, una cosa sola e NOSTRA' ['I want this work to be entirely OURS, born from the TWO OF US, one item and OURS'] (*LMA*, p. 46).

The puppet seems an apotropaic doll of fertility, its dark skin and the short grass skirt inciting us to imagine a connection with the early Italian colonies in Africa. Lucia looks at it, curiously from both sides, and then she utters in a facetious tone:

– [Lucia:] Poverino, quanto sole ha preso! Assomiglia tutto al suo papà.
– [Enrico:] Ha gli occhi chiari, è tutto il ritratto di mammà.
– No, perché è un maschio.
– Ma no, è una femminuccia, non vedi che ha la sottanina?
– Ti dico che è un maschio!
– Ma come fai a saperlo?
– Perché... perché ha i capelli corti.[51]

They both laugh at Lucia's playful but conclusive evidence that, despite the skirt, the puppet must be a boy because of its 'short hair'. There is some Freudian subtlety in this discussion: the impossibility of deriving the gender of the puppet from its sexual appearance, which determines its confusing place in the gender binary, highlights assumptions that are predicated on aspects of role-playing and, therefore, displays social and cultural effects of gender performativity. The agreed masculine gender must then be reinforced by a suitable professional identity, which is not as obvious as the 'mestiere di donna' ['profession of woman'] of the Ignota (*Mn* IV, 437). The silly dialogue that concludes this scene provides some further insights:

– [Lucia:] E che cosa ne faremo?
– [Enrico:] Ne faremo... un musicista di jazz!

– No, no, un compositore, come il suo papà.
– Compositore? Ma i compositori non compongono mai nulla, dispongono sempre di musica altrui.
[They laugh]
– [Lucia:] E allora?
– [Enrico:] Ne faremo invece... un grande...
– Artista di cinematografo!
– [Disapprovingly] Quello non è un mestiere.
– Di teatro?
– Per carità! Muoiono tutti di fame... Un boxeur! Così avrà molti quattrini.
– Tanti davvero![52]

The reference to jazz is particularly meaningful if we consider that was the first feature-length talkie was *The Jazz Singer*, released in 1927, where a white Jewish singer pursues a career on the Broadway scene by matching his voice with a blackface make-up. When in a later scene we see an old man listening to a record of 'canti negreschi' ['black songs'], and commenting that the singers 'cantano bene' ['sing well'], we realise that the question of essentialism as regards the performativity of 'raced' bodies, more or less consciously, resumes and expands on the private joke on the puppet that 'got too much sun' and could become a 'jazz musician'. More importantly, the gender assumptions that underpin the professional concerns about this Pirandellian *pupo* are framed by a troubling yet unsurprising mixture of fascism and melodrama. It is within this Italian cultural context, which is both historical and mainstream, that Enrico can sing out his love and have it performed as a destiny of motherhood by the subject of *La canzone dell'amore*.

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[1] Trans. M. Abba, in L. Pirandello, *As You Desire Me* (New York, Samuel French, 1948), p. 55. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are mine.
[2] G. Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 13.
[3] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1999), pp. xiv-xv.
[4] J. Derrida, 'Devant la loi' (1982), revised trans. A. Ronell, 'Before the Law', in Id., *Acts of Literature*, ed. D. Attridge (New York, Routledge, 1992), pp. 183-220 (p. 214).
[5] J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, Routledge, 1997), pp. 49-50.
[6] G. Podestà, 'Kafka e Pirandello', *Humanitas*, 11 (1956), 230-44.
[7] A. Giorgio, 'Tra Pirandello e Judith Butler: Forma e performatività nella narrativa di Marosia Castaldi', *Narrativa*, 30 (2008), 97-109.
[8] G. Genette, 'Discours du récit: essai de méthode', in *Figures III* (Paris, Seuil, 1972), pp. 65-278; trans. J. E. Lewin, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 235-36. Cf. Id., *Métalepse. De la figure à la fiction* (Paris, Seuil, 2004).
[9] S. S. Lanser, 'Sexing Narratology: Toward a Gendered Poetics of Narrative Voice', in *Narrative Theory: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. M. Bal (London, Routledge, 2004 [1999]), pp. 123-39 (p. 127). Cf. W. Wolf, 'Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon: A Case Study of the Possibilities of "Exporting" Narratological Concepts', in *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality, Disciplinarity*, ed. J. C. Meister (Berlin, de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 83-107.
[10] 'if you were beside another and looking into his eyes – as I one day looked into somebody's eyes – you might as well be a beggar before a door never to be opened to you; for he who does enter there will

never be you, but someone unknown to you with his own different and impenetrable world...'. Trans. E. Bentley, in L. Pirandello, *Naked Masks: Five Plays* (New York, Dutton, 1952), p. 193.
[11] J. Champagne, *Aesthetic Modernism and Masculinity in Fascist Italy* (London and New York, Routledge, 2013), p. 67. See also Id., 'The Unknown Woman as a Man: Gender Identity and *Come tu mi vuoi*', *Pirandello Studies*, 33 (2013), 115-25.
[12] D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. Fate Norton and M. J. Norton (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007), vol. I, p. 165.
[13] See B. Szabados and E. Soifer, *Hypocrisy: Ethical Investigations* (Peterborough, Broadview Press, 2004), pp. 19-20.
[14] A. Hallamore Caesar, *Characters and Authors in Pirandello* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 48, n. 14.
[15] J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 12. Cf. J. Loxley, *Performativity: The New Critical Idiom* (London, Routledge, 2006), pp. 139-66.
[16] See P. Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 24 and 165.
[17] J. Riviere, 'Womanliness as a masquerade', in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. V. Burgin, J. Donald, and C. Kaplan (New York, Methuen, 1986), pp. 35-44. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 55-73.
[18] G. Sapienza, *Lettera aperta* (Palermo, Sellerio, 1997 [1967]), p. 146.
[19] Z. Luria, 'Genre et étiquetage: L'effet Pirandello', in *Le fait féminin*, ed. É. Sullerot (Paris, Fayard, 1978), pp. 233-42 (p. 234). The quoted passage is translated by E. Loverde-Bagwell in G. Castro, *American Feminism: A Contemporary History* (New York, New York University Press, 1990), pp. 127-28.
[20] See Y. Christen, *L'egalité des sexes: L'un n'est pas l'autre* (Monaco, Editions du Rocher, 1987), trans. N. Davidson, *Sex Differences: Modern Biology and the Unisex Fallacy* (New Brunswick & London, Transaction Publishers, 1991), pp. 57-64.
[21] E. Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement: The Cunning of Unreason* (London, Paladin, 1985; 3rd edn Oxford, Blackwell, 2003), pp. 199-200, n. 1; see also *ibid.*, pp. 39-64.
[22] E. Gellner, 'The concept of a story', in *Contemporary Thought and Politics*, ed. I. C. Jarvie and J. Agassi (London and Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 95-112 (p. 99). Cf. W. Bryce Gallie, 'Essentially contested concepts' (1956), revised repr. in *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1964), pp. 157-91; Id., 'Art as an essentially contested concept', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1956), 97-114.
[23] Gellner, 'The concept of a story', pp. 108-09.
[24] See O. M. Skilleås, *Philosophy and Literature: An Introduction* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 56-58; and M. S. Strine, B. Whitaker Long, and M. F. Hopkins, 'Research in interpretation and Performance Studies: trends, issues, priorities', in *Speech Communication*, ed. G. M. Phillips and J. T. Wood (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), pp. 181-204 (pp. 183-84).
[25] E. Gellner, *Spectacles and Predicaments: Essays in Social Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991 [1979]), p. 6. Cf. D. Santeramo, 'Pirandello's Quest for Truth: *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*', in *Luigi Pirandello: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. G.-P. Biasin and M. Gieri (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 37-52 (pp. 37-38).
[26] L. Pirandello, 'Illustratori, attori e traduttori' (1908), trans. 'Illustrators, Actors and Translators', in *Luigi Pirandello in the Theatre: A Documentary Record*, ed. S. Bassnett and J. Lorch (London, Routledge, 2013 [1993]), pp. 23-34 (p. 27).
[27] A. Savinio, '*I giganti della montagna* al Maggio Fiorentino' (1937), in *Palchetti romani*, ed. A. Tinterri (Milano, Adelphi, 1982), pp. 64-65. Cf. P. Puppa, 'Savinio *versus* Pirandello' (1996), in *Parola di scena. Teatro italiano tra '800 e '900* (Roma, Bulzoni, 1999), pp. 121-39 (p. 138).
[28] D. Bini, *Pirandello and His Muse: The Plays for Marta Abba* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 80 and 86.
[29] See V. Marchetti, *L'invenzione della bisessualità. Discussioni fra teologi, medici, e giuristi del XVII secolo sull'ambiguità delle corpi e delle anime* (Milano, Mondadori, 2001). Cf. A. Rosalind Jones and P. Stallybras, 'Fetishizing Gender: Constructing the Hermapbrodite in Renaissance Europe', in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. J. Epstein and K. Straub (New York, Routledge, 1991), pp. 80-111.
[30] J. Derrida, 'La loi du genre' (1986), revised trans. A. Ronell, 'The Law of Genre', in Id., *Acts of Literature*, pp. 223-52 (p. 223). Cf. P. Osborne and L. Segal, 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy*, 67 (1994), 32-39.
[31] See G. Moses, *The Nickel Was for the Movies: Film in the Novel from Pirandello to Puig* (Berkeley, Universty of California Press, 1995).

[32] C. Gledhill, 'Introduction', in *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinema*, ed. by C. Gledhill (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2012), pp. 1-11 (p. 2).
[33] G. Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, Routledge, 1988), pp. 197-221 (p. 205).
[34] See P. Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (London and New York, Tauris, 2001), p. 123.
[35] See L. Pirandello, 'Da "In silenzio" a "La canzone dell'amore"', *Kines*, November 23 (1930), 11-12.
[36] N. daVinci Nichols, *Pirandello and Film* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 1995), p. 98.
[37] See M. Chusid, *Verdi's 'Il trovatore': The Quintessential Italian Melodrama* (Rochester NY, University of Rochester Press, 2012).
[38] Cf. E. De Francisci, 'Generations (Duse-Abba), Genders (The Performing Female Artist) and Genres (From "Leonora, Addio!" to *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*)', *Pirandello Studies*, 32 (2012), 58-70.
[39] '*behind the stage curtain drawn to hide the corner edge where the wall bracket with the street light is, the stage hands have set up a phonograph on which they have put the end of the first act of an Italian opera, "La Forza del Destino" ["The Force of Destiny"] or "Un Ballo in Maschera" ["A Masked Ball"] or some other. It is synchronized with the film being shown on the white wall that serves as a screen*'. Trans. M. Abba, in L. Pirandello, *Tonight We Improvise* (New York, Samuel French, 1960 [1932]), p. 35.
[40] M. Grover-Friedlander, 'The Phantom of the Opera: The Lost Voice of Opera in Silent Film' (1999), in *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 19-32 (p. 19).
[41] See M. Günsberg, *Patriarchal Representations: Gender and Discourse in Pirandello's Theatre* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p. 10; cf. Id., *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).
[42] L. Pirandello, 'Soggettivismo e oggettivismo nell'arte narrativa' ['Subjectivism and Objectivism in Narrative Art'] (1906) (*Si*, 684-712). Cf. Caesar, *Characters and Authors*, pp. 20-24.
[43] L. Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44 (1991), 2-13 (pp. 10-11).
[44] 'An only son, he had not known his father, who must have died extremely young since his mother, who was thirty-seven, could still be called young. He himself was already eighteen, exactly the same age his mother was when she had gotten married.' Trans. G. Bussino, 'In Silence', in L. Pirandello, *Tales of Suicide* (Boston, Dante University of America Press, 1988), pp. 65-84 (p. 66).
[45] E. Gioanola, *Pirandello, la follia* (Genova, Il Melangolo, 1983), p. 25.
[46] Cf. L. Pirandello, 'Pubertà' ['Puberty'] (*Na* II, 468-73). See U. Fanning, 'Short Story Strategies: Matters of Genre, Gender and Generation', *Pirandello Studies*, 32 (2012), 14-25 (pp. 21-22).
[47] G. Bussino, 'Introduction' to L. Pirandello, *Tales of Suicide* (Boston, Dante University of America Press, 1988), pp. I-X (p. III).
[48] See I. Pupo, *Interviste a Pirandello* (Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2002), p. 487.
[49] See P. Campolonghi, '*La canzone dell'amore*: Adapting Pirandello to Fascist Propaganda', *Pirandello Society of America* (2015), 45-61.
[50] – [Lucia:] Will you really come back soon? – [Enrico:] Yes, I promise, soon. – For me? – For you… and for our baby. – Our baby? – You abandoned it!
[51] – [Lucia:] The poor little thing got too much sun! It looks just like its father. – [Enrico:] It has bright eyes, it's the splitting image of his mother. – No, it's not, because it's a boy. – Not at all, it's a little girl, don't you see it's wearing an underskirt? – I tell you it's a boy! – How do you know? – Because… it's got short hair.
[52] – [Lucia:] What shall we do with him? – [Enrico:] We will turn him into… a jazz musician! – No, no, a composer, like his father. – A composer? But composers never compose anything, they always dispose of somebody else's music. [They laugh] – [Lucia:] What then? – [Enrico:] We'll turn him into… a great… – Cinema artist! – [Disapprovingly] That's not a profession. – Theatre? – Heaven forbid! They all die of starvation… A boxer! So that he will make a lot of money. – A lot indeed!